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Djoko quietly confident for Monte Carlo Masters

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GULF TIMES SPORT

FOOTBALL
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FOCUS
Samuel Eto'o unveiled as an SC Global Ambassador

Samuel Eto'o, one of the most decorated players in world football, has officially joined the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) as a Global Ambassador. Eto'o has won 15 major honours in his glittering career to-date, a haul that includes three UEFA Champions League victories, four league titles across spells in Italy and Spain, and one FIFA Club World Cup. He joins Xavi Hernandez and Mohamed Saadon al-Kuwari as official SC Ambassadors. The former Cameroon international Eto'o has also earned 118 international caps – including appearances at four FIFA World Cups between 1998 and 2014. In August 2018, he joined QNB Stars League side Qatar Sports Club and made a new home for himself in the host country of the next FIFA World Cup. During a special signing ceremony with SC Secretary-General Hassan al-Thawadi, he officially became part of the journey on the road to 2022. The four-time African Player of Year said, "It's a great honour for me to be an ambassador for the SC and hope I am able to deliver what is expected of me.

The World Cup is the biggest competition in football – there is nothing bigger – and I think that for the players who have had the chance to play in the World Cup there is nothing more beautiful." Eto'o continued: "Football goes much further than politics and it's important that football travels the world because it's everywhere – it's an incredible social force. It has an impact on our lives even if some do not like football – we are always paying attention to football and I am happy that Qatar is and will be the face of it for a month during the World Cup, and Qatar will also be the face of the Middle East." With a particular focus on workers' welfare projects, Eto'o will assist and support the SC in the delivery and implementation of a number of its initiatives, as it continues its work to deliver an outstanding FIFA World Cup and also ensure the legacy of the competition is long lasting and far reaching. The striker, who in 1998 appeared at his first FIFA World Cup at the age of just 17 years and three months, has also made an impact away from the profes-



Samuel Eto'o (right) with Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy Secretary-General Hassan al-Thawadi.

In addition to this, in March 2006, he launched the Samuel Eto'o Foundation and has since built football schools across Africa with the goal of encouraging young people to have access to sporting facilities to hone their skills, while also providing the frameworks required for them to continue their studies. The foundation also provides healthcare and social integration opportunities for those who attend. On his passion for using the power of football to affect positive social change, Eto'o added: "It always humbles me to know that I can bring a smile to someone's face with small acts of kindness like lending an ear. What may seem benign to us, can mean the world to others. "I told myself I have to share my experience with some, and above all, the grassroots in Cameroon in particular and in Africa in general. I can establish football schools which will allow some young people to overcome some obstacles which they might face in Europe. "This is why I embarked on this beautiful project that excites me every day and I'm happy because I have some

players who now play with some of Europe's biggest clubs. It gives pride for me as the face of the foundation but all those backing me have also played a big role in giving the youth this opportunity." Commenting on the announcement, al-Thawadi welcomed Eto'o to the team. He said: "Samuel is one of the most successful footballers in the history of the game, and we welcome him to join us on this unique journey. As well as his remarkable achievements on the field, what makes him stand out is the commitment he has shown to using his profile to affect positive change away from the professional game. "We have always been steadfast in our own commitment to ensuring this World Cup is not only about the 28 days of on-pitch action, but about the impact it will have across the Arab world and beyond, for generations to come. I am confident that working alongside someone of Samuel's calibre, stature and character can only positively help us to achieve these goals together." (SC.qa)

GOLF / THE MASTERS



43-year-old wins his 15th major after a gap of 11 years

By Ewan Murray
 The Guardian

Tiger Woods wins the Masters. If ever five words did not do justice to an outcome... Let debate now rage as to where this sits in the pantheon of sporting comebacks. Fourteen years after he last put on the Green Jacket, 11 years after last winning a major and 24 months after conceding to friends "I'm done" Woods completed a triumph which rates as extraordinary even by his standards. It seemed poetic for the sensational act to transpire at Augusta, where Woods began altering the shape of golf in 1997. Twenty-two years on, a 43-year-old Woods celebrated more wildly than ever before in the company of his mother and children. Tiger Woods: five-times Masters champion. The scene was barely believable. That Woods won

his 15th major from the position of behind after 54 holes – something he had not achieved before – barely registered amid the chaos. It would require the pagination of a telephone directory to properly record what occurred on this Masters Sunday. Woods's closing round of 70 for a 13-under-par 275 ensured he won by one from Dustin Johnson, Xander Schauffele and Brooks Koepka; not that anybody seemed particularly bothered about raw details. Superlatives rained from the skies. Francesco Molinari, who showed such fortitude for three and a half days, wobbled horribly over Augusta's famous closing stretch. The sorest episode of all for the holder of the Claret Jug arrived at the 15th, where he found the middle of a pond when only 79 yards from the hole. Molinari's share of fifth does not at all illustrate his contribution to this major. At 9.20am all 445 yards of the 1st hole – with spectators 10 deep in places – gave the impression half



Last year's Masters champion Patrick Reed (left) puts the Green Jacket on for Tiger Woods after the latter won the 2019 edition in Augusta, United States, yesterday. (AFP)

the state of Georgia was watching the final group. Woods, by his own admission prone to terrible bouts of nervousness before opening tee shots, split the fairway. As Molinari tugged his approach shot long and left, gallery excitement grew; the Open champion was to save par from 13ft. A straightforward Woods bird-

ie at the 3rd reduced Molinari's advantage to one. As the wind whipped, Woods under-clubbed his tee shot to the par-three next and paid the penalty by way of a bogey. There was likewise for Woods at the 5th, a hole he played in an aggregate of plus four. Suddenly Molinari was three clear. The sense this would be Mo-

linari's day escalated as Woods failed to convert from 11ft for a birdie at the 6th. Molinari, having air-mailed the green, scrambled quite brilliantly for par. Unbowed, Woods fired an approach to the 7th to tap-in range as Molinari dropped a shot, his first in 50 holes. Woods produced a contender for shot of the Masters at the 9th, with a lagged downhill putt from 70ft. There was no such salvation on 10 where Woods paid for a pushed tee shot by way of another bogey. Molinari's advantage was two from Woods and Koepka, with the latter seriously wounded by the finding of Rae's Creek from the 12th tee. Koepka's mental error proved a sign of things to come. How that 12th hole, at just 147 yards, torments the finest players in the world in the final round. Ian Poulter had already followed Koepka into the water by the time Molinari and Woods were roared onto the 12th tee as if gladiators. Perhaps Molinari's mind slipped towards what grisly outcomes Amen Corner's reputation is built on; a miscued iron shot bounced from the bank and into the most famous stream in golf. It

was the least surprising Sunday act that Woods took dead aim for the centre of the green. Molinari's double-bogey dropped him back to a share of the lead at 11 under. He did not just have Woods for company at this stage; up ahead on the 13th green Xander Schauffele's birdie meant a three-way tie. Rain battered down to add to the sense of theatre. Patrick Cantlay produced an eagle at the 15th to skip to the top of the leaderboard at 12 under. The final group had holes – including two par-fives – on their side but worsening weather could offset the advantage. Schauffele joined Cantlay with a birdie at the 14th. Molinari's approach to the 13th clung on for dear life, thereby – temporarily – saving him a second visit to Rae's Creek. Cantlay's dropped shot at 16 and Schauffele's failure to take advantage of the defenceless 15th looked significant. Cantlay stumbled again at the penultimate hole. Not so Johnson. Birdies at the 16th and 17th edged him to a share of the lead – Koepka immediately joined the same party – as Woods launched a

drive to within 234 yards of the par-five 15th green. Molinari's capitulation, painful to view, was the next sensational strand. Having caught far too much turf with his third shot to the 15th Molinari was lucky his fifth did not find water as well. It did not particularly matter; a double-bogey was a decisive blow in respect of his Masters hopes. The 16th, where Woods has previous, saw the winner hit his tee shot to three feet. The lead was two. Tiger, young or old, does not fritter that away. Woods had two putts for victory at that 18th; in addition to the drama, he used them. As the leaders jostled so, too, did the remaining non-professionals. Viktor Hovland took the honours for the low amateur. "I felt really calm out there," the 21-year-old Norwegian said. He could have sold that emotion for a good few dollars to players of higher status. Rory McIlroy, a self-confessed "Tiger geek" posted a 68 for a share of 21st before finding a berth from which to witness the denouement. "It's anyone's," said McIlroy at that stage. It was Tiger's.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Salah wonder-strike keeps Liverpool top; City win at Palace

Result restores Liverpool's lead at the top, though City have a game in hand



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah is congratulated by teammates after he scored a goal against Chelsea during their Premier League match in Liverpool, England, yesterday. (Reuters)

DPA
London

Mohamed Salah scored a stunning goal as Liverpool beat Chelsea 2-0 yesterday and kept their noses in front of Manchester City in the race for the Premier League title.

Champions City held top spot for a couple of hours after they won 3-1 at Crystal Palace, with Raheem Sterling scoring twice.

But a Sadio Mane header and a brilliant strike from Salah gave Liverpool a vital home win over fourth-placed Chelsea.

The result restored Liverpool's two-point lead at the top, though City have a game in hand.

"It's really big," Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson said.

"It's another big game we have won. We have to concentrate on ourselves, work hard on the training pitch and the focus is on the next game."

"We are enjoying it and that's the main thing."

With City winning at Palace earlier in the day, Liverpool knew they could not afford to slip up.

The home side dominated possession in the first half but Chelsea held firm in defence to keep it goalless at the break.

But two goals in three minutes turned the game in Liverpool's favour.



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling (right) celebrates his goal with teammate Kevin De Bruyne during the Premier League match against Crystal Palace in London yesterday. (Reuters)

First Mane headed Henderson's cross into the net for the opener on 51 minutes before Salah rifled in an unstoppable shot from 25 metres to double their lead.

Eden Hazard hit the post for Chelsea and forced a good save from Alisson but Liverpool held on to keep themselves in front.

City avoided a potential banana skin as they won 3-1 at Palace, with Sterling scoring the

first two goals, before Gabriel Jesus added a late third.

"We controlled the ball really well but one moment in the game and they are back in it," Sterling said. "But we responded again and got the third goal."

"We always knew coming here in the past that it's a difficult place to come. We got two goals but knew we couldn't switch off."

"We kept pushing and kept making it difficult — glad to get

the third goal. We knew we had to be on it from the first minute."

Sterling had City 2-0 up by the hour mark, having earlier missed a simple chance to open the scoring.

The England forward put the champions in front after 15 minutes but Palace, who won at City earlier in the season, held out for the rest of the half.

Sterling doubled the lead on 63 minutes but Luca Milivojevic gave

Palace hope with a clever free kick nine minutes from time.

Palace had a couple of half-chances to threaten an equaliser but Jesus dashed any hopes of a comeback with the third, although replays suggested he was marginally offside.

"This pressure is incredible," City manager Pep Guardiola said of the title run-in as they bid to win every trophy possible this term.

"We are fighting to be champions back to back. In two seasons we've got 83 points with five games left. We've won two titles (Community Shield and League Cup) and now it's the FA Cup final."

Sterling said he expects the title race to go right down to the final day.

"100 per cent, the way Liverpool have been playing," he said.

"It will go down to the wire. I don't see us slowing down now. Liverpool have a great squad, great self-belief, but so do we."

Palace remain 13th and manager Roy Hodgson had no complaints about the result.

"We got better as the game went on and in the second half we gave it a good shot," he said.

RESULTS

■ Crystal Palace 1 (Milivojevic 81) Manchester City 3 (Sterling 15, 63, Jesus 90)
■ Liverpool 2 (Mane 51, Salah 53) Chelsea 0

FOCUS

Solskjaer admits Man Utd benefited from good fortune in win over West Ham

Reuters
Manchester, England

Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said his side "got away with it" as United warmed up for their Champions League clash with Barcelona with a laboured 2-1 win over West Ham United on Saturday.

Since Solskjaer was appointed permanent United manager last month, the Red Devils have struggled to find the form that helped them to an 11-match unbeaten streak when the Norwegian first took over on an interim basis in December.

After being given the job permanently, Solskjaer's side saw off Watford but they then lost successive matches to Wolverhampton Wanderers and then Barcelona in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final at Old Trafford.

Barcelona will carry a 1-0 advantage into next week's return leg comfortable in the knowledge that they did not face a shot on target.

Against West Ham on Saturday, United needed a penalty to take a first-half lead at Old Trafford and, after the visitors levelled through Felipe Anderson, United needed the crossbar and a brilliant David de Gea save to keep the scores level.

Paul Pogba stepped up to score United's second penalty of the game and Solskjaer admitted his side were lucky to secure all three points.

"We got away with it. Sometimes you get more than you deserve and today is one of them nights," Solskjaer said. "Watford was one of them as well."

"We were lucky it wasn't Barcelona but West Ham played well."

It was United's second win in six games in all competitions since their remarkable comeback victory over Paris St Germain in the Champions League's round of 16.

They will now be hoping they can produce another stirring fightback against Barcelona tomorrow.

Barcelona have won 27 of their last 30 Champions League home matches and drawn the other three. They have never lost to United at home in the competition but Solskjaer is refusing to give up hope.

"We know it is going to be a very difficult game but we beat PSG," Solskjaer added. "It will be a greater achievement if we can manage it against Barcelona because we know what they are."

"We will go there, why not have a go but we have to be better defensively."

One glimmer of hope for United is that a much-changed Barcelona were held by La Liga bottom side Huesca on Saturday.



West Ham to ban fans for life over anti-Semitic video

AFP
London

West Ham fans identified in a video chanting anti-Semitic slogans will be barred for life, the Premier League club said yesterday.

The video surfaced of the Hammers supporters chants on their way to Saturday's Premier League away match with Manchester United.

This follows days after a video captured Chelsea fans singing an Islamophobic song about Liverpool's Egyptian forward Mohamed Salah, before their Europa League match against Czech side Slavia Prague.

Three of the six people in the video were identified and barred. A similar fate awaits the West Hams supporters.

"We are disgusted by the contents of the video," said a West Ham spokesperson.

"These people are not welcome at our club — they are not welcome in civilised society."

"We are taking immediate action to try to identify the offenders, whose details we will be handing over to the police and will be banned for life from London Stadium and from travelling with the club. "West Ham United is unequivocal in its stance — there is no place for this kind of behaviour at our club."

Greater Manchester Police appealed for those in possession of the images to get in touch.

Detective Chief Inspector Rebecca Boyce said she "welcomed West Ham's statement" which "quite rightly condemns these disgusting and abhorrent slurs".

"Here in Manchester we pride ourselves on making sure fans from far and wide are welcomed and it is disappointing that a small few have brought shame on football in this way."

SPOTLIGHT

Celtic ease into Cup final as Aberdeen implode



Celtic's Odsonne Edouard (right) celebrates after scoring against Aberdeen during their Scottish Cup semi-final in Glasgow yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Glasgow

Celtic's hopes of a third successive domestic treble is firmly on course after they cruised into the Scottish Cup final with a 3-0 win over an Aberdeen side that imploded yesterday.

Goals by James Forrest, Odsonne Edouard with a penalty and Australian Tom Rogic gave Neil Lennon's team an easy passage into the final where they will meet Hearts, who beat Inverness 3-0 on Saturday.

However, Aberdeen will have

only themselves to blame for not offering more resistance as both Dominic Ball — sent off for a terrible aerial challenge on Ryan Christie who had to go off and was given medical attention in the dressing room — and Lewis Ferguson were red-carded for ugly challenges.

The coaching staff too felt the wrong end of the officials' tongues too as manager Derek McInnes and assistant Tony Docherty were sent to the stands in a day that the club will want to forget very quickly.

Forrest's excellent goal sent them in at half-time 1-0 up and the ideal launching pad for their

dominant second-half performance although it was Ball's 36th minute dismissal that turned the match.

"The red card settled us and we got the goal. Thereafter we were well in control of the game," Celtic midfielder Callum McGregor told BBC Scotland.

"James (Forrest) is a top player and he can produce moments like that when games are tight and it shows what a special player he is."

McGregor said the league title remained the priority — they are 11 points clear of bitter rivals Rangers — and the second part of their treble ambitions.

"It will be a very tough game against Hearts, but that will be in the back of our minds," he said.

"We have two massive games to secure the league title."

As for Christie McGregor said the seriousness of the incident was highlighted by the length of time he was prone on the pitch.

"He took a real sore one, you could see by the length of time he was down it's a serious one," said McGregor.

"He was in just getting assessed at half-time by the doctor, so I think he was okay, but they need to take their time and make sure he's okay properly!"

SERIE A

Napoli win to delay Juve celebrations, send Chievo down

Juve can secure the title by avoiding defeat at home to Fiorentina next weekend

Reuters
Rome

Napoli postponed Juventus' march to the Serie A title and consigned Chievo to relegation with a 3-1 win at the Stadio Bentegodi yesterday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side needed a victory to ensure that the Turin club, who lost 2-1 at SPAL on Saturday, would not wrap up their eighth consecutive league championship with a record six games to spare.

Two goals from Kalidou Koulibaly either side of an Arkadiusz Milik strike confirmed Chievo's demotion despite Bostjan Cesar's late consolation, after a miserable season in which the Verona club have recorded just one win in 32 games.

The result leaves second-placed Napoli on 67 points, 17 behind runaway leaders Juventus on 84.

Juve can secure the title by avoiding defeat at home to Fiorentina next weekend.

Napoli were in poor form going into the game, having lost their Europa League quarter-final first leg against Arsenal 2-0 in London last week on the back of a draw against Genoa and defeat to Empoli in Serie A.

Ancelotti picked a strong team as he looked to return to winning ways ahead of his side's second leg clash with the Premier League side at the Stadio San Paolo on Thursday.

"It's always difficult to choose my team and it was today too," the Napoli coach told Sky Sports Italia.

"I wanted to use a reliable side that had a lot of character, as against Empoli I made a lot of changes and we lost something in terms of personality."

Goalkeeper David Ospina returned for the first time since being hospitalised after suffering a head injury in a league game with Udinese on 17 March.

Milik, Lorenzo Insigne and Dries Mertens all started in an attack-minded line-up and An-



Napoli's Kalidou Koulibaly (centre) scores his team's first goal during the Serie A match against Chievo in Verona, Italy, yesterday. (Reuters)

celotti suggested he could take the same approach for the visit of Arsenal this week.

"It's a possibility," he said. "I preserved Milik early in the season, but he can do great things that put him along the top strikers in Europe."

"We were surprised by the Arsenal pressing game, as we couldn't play our way out from the back and kept trying to do it rather than attempt long balls."

"Their second half performance is more like the attitude

they'll have here at the San Paolo, so going for the counter-attack."

"I chose Insigne and Mertens together because they are both quicker than Milik, so I wanted to use their pace. I think next Thursday the key will be to play a lot of vertical passes."

CHIEVO CONSOLATION

Napoli profited from some slack finishing when Koulibaly snuck in at the front post to head in the opener from close range after 15 minutes.

Milik doubled Napoli's lead with a curling strike into the bottom corner from outside the box midway through the second half before Koulibaly completed his brace with a low finish inside the final 10 minutes.

Bostjan Cesar headed in from a corner to pull one back for Chievo with the final act of the game.

Domenico Di Carlo's side have won one game, drawn 11 and lost 20 so far this season

but prop up the table with just 11 points, having been handed a three-point deduction for false accounting at the start of the campaign.

RESULTS

- Torino 1 (Zaza 52) Cagliari 1 (Pavoletti 75)
- Fiorentina 0 Bologna 0
- Sampdoria 2 (Defrel 3, Quagliarella 53-pen) Genoa 0
- Sassuolo 0 Parma 0
- Chievo 1 (Cesar 90) Napoli 3 (Koulibaly 15, 81, Milik 64)

LA LIGA

Molina penalty earns Getafe late draw at Valladolid

DPA
Barcelona

Jorge Molina's 96th minute penalty earned 10-man Getafe a 2-2 draw at Real Valladolid yesterday in La Liga to keep them within a point of fourth place and potential Champions League qualification.

Villarreal earned an important 1-0 victory at Girona to climb out of the relegation zone, while Athletic Bilbao edged a 3-2 thriller against Rayo Vallecano.

Getafe, in fifth, were below their best at the Jose Zorrilla and played most of the second half with 10 men after Matias Olivera swung an arm at Oscar Plano.

However a debatable late penalty stopped Valladolid, 18th, from making progress in their bid to escape relegation, leaving the hosts one point from safety.

Mauro Arambarri sent the visitors ahead with a tremendous strike from long distance but Sergi Guardiola levelled after half an hour.

The game turned in Valladolid's favour when Olivera was dismissed in the 63rd minute, with Enes Unal slotting home a penalty after Djene Dakonam's handball shortly after.

Valladolid had a goal correctly disallowed for offside before a controversial finale saw Getafe awarded a penalty when Plano clashed with Hugo Duro in the area.

Molina converted it to give Getafe a point and frustrate Valladolid.

"It will not be easy to win games, as we saw today against Real Valladolid, who play well and have great fans, and we will have to suffer a lot from here until the end of the season," said Getafe coach Jose Bordalas.

"It will be very difficult to get points because all the teams are

playing for something." Villarreal rose to 15th as Samuel Chukwueze's seventh-minute strike set up victory at Girona's Montilivi stadium.

The Catalans, who have won twice at home all season, are 14th and now part of the relegation battle, sitting just three points above the drop zone.

Athletic Bilbao moved seventh as they outlasted Rayo, with the Madrid side 19th, now five points from safety.

Jordi Amat's own goal sent Athletic ahead in the second minute but Raul Garcia missed a penalty when he might have doubled the Basque side's lead.

Alex Moreno equalized just before half-time but Inaki Williams struck to send Athletic back ahead and Garcia added the third after Rayo's Luis Advincola was dismissed for two yellow cards.

Raul de Tomas pulled one back for the visitors with five minutes remaining to set up a frantic finale but Athletic held on for the win.

Real Sociedad drew 1-1 with Eibar, as striker Juanmi sent the hosts ahead after just 11 seconds but Joan Jordan's 85th minute equalizer earned the visitors a point. La Real are 10th while Eibar are 12th.

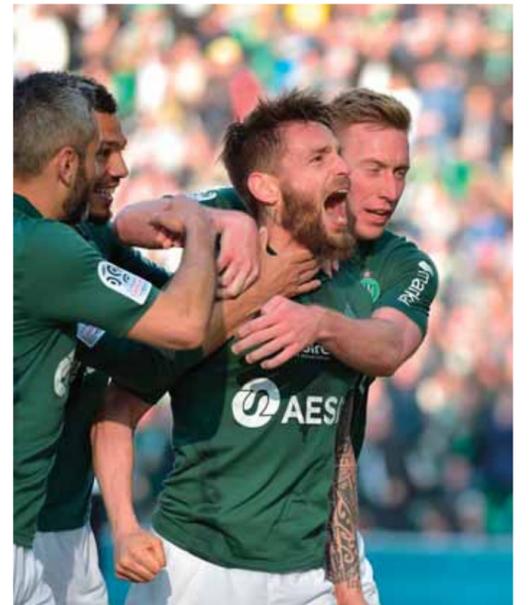
Barcelona, nine points clear at the top of the table, drew 0-0 at bottom side Huesca on Saturday.

RESULTS

- Valladolid 2 (Guardiola Navarro 30, Unal 69-pen) Getafe 2 (Arambarri 14, Jorge Molina 90+6-pen)
- Athletic Bilbao 3 (Williams 2, 50, Raul Garcia 72) Rayo Vallecano 2 (Moreno Lopera 45, Tomas 85)
- Real Sociedad 1 (Juanmi 1) Eibar 1 (Jordan Moreno 85)
- Girona 0 Villarreal 1 (Chukwueze 7)

LIGUE 1

Saint-Etienne heat up Champions League charge with Bordeaux triumph



Saint-Etienne's Mathieu Debuchy (centre) celebrates his goal during the Ligue 1 match against Bordeaux at the Geoffroy Guichard Stadium in Saint-Etienne, France, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Saint Etienne, France

Saint-Etienne closed in on Champions League football next season after Mathieu Debuchy scored twice in a 3-0 win over Bordeaux that moves them to within three points of third-placed Lyon yesterday.

Wahbi Khazri opened the scoring from the spot 10 minutes after the break following a VAR check of Sergi Palencia's handball before Debuchy headed home the second from a corner to seal the points 17 minutes before the end.

Debuchy then completed the win with a deflected close-range strike in the final minute to put Jean-Louis Gasset's side back

ahead of Marseille, who started the day fourth and in the Europa League spot after surviving late VAR penalty drama on Saturday to scrape to a 2-1 win over Nimes.

They are two points ahead of Rudi Garcia's side and piling pressure on Lyon, who have lost two on the bounce following Friday's shock 2-1 defeat at Nantes.

Lyon go into the final six games in trouble following coach Bruno Genesio's announcement that he would leave the club in the summer after falling out of favour with the fans.

RESULTS

- Montpellier 2 (Skhiri 55, Camara 77) Toulouse 1 (Sidibe 67)
- Rennes 0 Nice 0
- Saint-Etienne 3 (Khazri 56-pen, Debuchy 74, 90) Bordeaux 0

BUNDESLIGA

Coman sends Bayern back to the top with victory at Dusseldorf

DPA
Berlin

Kingsley Coman scored twice to propel Bayern Munich back to the top of the Bundesliga with a regulation 4-1 win at Fortuna Dusseldorf yesterday.

Borussia Dortmund, hammered 5-0 at Bayern last weekend, had retaken first place with Saturday's nervous 2-1 home win over Mainz but now trail again by a point with five matches left.

Bayern's injury-prone goalkeeper Manuel Neuer had to limp off in the second half but the result was never in doubt with Coman, involved in a fight with team-mate Robert Lewandowski in midweek, clearing the air with two first-half goals.

"It doesn't affect us when we have a bit of pressure," Bayern's Thomas Mueller told Sky as they racked up 25 points from the last 27 available. "We have it in our own hands, we have to go game by game."

Fourth-placed Eintracht Frankfurt's run of six straight league wins came to an end in a 3-1 home defeat by Augsburg and their new coach Martin Schmidt. Hoffenheim overcame Hertha Berlin 2-0 at home to go



Bayern Munich's Thomas Mueller (left) and Kingsley Coman (right) celebrate their goal against Fortuna Dusseldorf in Dusseldorf, Germany, yesterday. (Reuters)

sixth and maintain their push for a European place.

Bayern started with Coman and Lewandowski despite the pair coming to physical blows in training. It was Coman who glanced the post with a flick following a cross by fellow winger Serge Gnabry early on.

Coman then scored the opener on 15 minutes when his cross drifted in at the far post with Mueller not quite getting a touch.

France international Coman made it 2-0 just before half-

time when he converted Joshua Kimmich's excellent pull back.

Gnabry added another on 55 minutes from close range following a corner.

Dusseldorf's Dodi Lukebakio, who bagged a hat-trick when Bayern were held 3-3 at home in November, slotted in a late spotkick after the video assistant surprisingly decided Mats Hummels deliberately handled. Bayern substitute Leon Goretzka then netted in injury time.

Bayern look favourites for

their seventh straight title but Dortmund fans will still hope for a twist in the tale in the coming weeks in the best Bundesliga run-in for years. Bayern host seventh-placed Werder Bremen next weekend while Dortmund go to Freiburg in 13th.

Mid-table Dusseldorf, who celebrated being officially safe in the Bundesliga on Saturday in their first season back in the top flight, had their preparations slightly clouded by the club's board admitting it wanted

to sack chief executive Robert Schaefer.

The only negative for Bayern was another injury to Neuer, who asked to be substituted with a calf problem. Hummels also felt his hamstring.

Frankfurt, who host Benfica on Thursday in the Europa League quarter-finals after a 4-2 defeat last week, started superbly against Augsburg but quickly fell away.

Goncalo Paciencia leapt to head home on 14 minutes but Marco Richter scored two classy strikes to put the visitors ahead at the break and Michael Gregoritsch added a late third.

Gelson Fernandes received a second booking for the Eagles, who stayed in the final Champions League spot but their cushion over fifth-placed Borussia Moenchengladbach is now just a point.

Augsburg are now seven points above the relegation play-off spot.

RESULTS

- Hoffenheim 2 (Amiri 30, Nelson 76) Hertha Berlin 0
- Fortuna Dusseldorf 1 (Lukebakio 89-pen) Bayern Munich 4 (Coman 15, 41, Gnabry 55, Goretzka 90+2)
- Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Paciencia 15) Augsburg 3 (Richter 31, 45+4, Gregoritsch 84)

IPL

Tahir and Raina help Super Kings put foot in playoffs

'I bowl according to the captain. It's always beneficial taking advice of Dhoni. He is a legend and has been helping me a lot this season. Credit goes to him'



Chennai Super Kings bowler Imran Tahir celebrates after taking the wicket of Kolkata Knight Riders' Chris Lynn during their 2019 Indian Premier League match at the Eden Gardens Cricket Stadium in Kolkata yesterday. (AFP)

IAN S
Kolkata

Imran Tahir and Suresh Raina helped Chennai Super Kings (CSK) put one foot in the playoffs as they got past Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) by five wickets in their Indian Premier League (IPL) return leg fixture at the Eden Gardens yesterday.

CSK, who had defeated KKR in their first meeting also, consolidated their spot at the top of the table with 14 points from eight matches.

KKR, on the other hand, slumped to their third straight defeat, remaining on eight points from eight matches.

Tahir (4/27) first played a pivotal role in restricting KKR to 161/8.

Chasing a modest 162 for victory, Raina struck an unbeaten 58 off 42 balls (7x4; 1x6), his 36th IPL fifty, adding 41 runs with Ravindra Jadeja (31 off 17 balls not out; 4x5) for the sixth wicket.

CSK needed 24 in the last two overs, but Jadeja hit Harry Gurney for a hat-trick of fours in the 19th over to bring the equation down to eight runs off six balls.

The India all-rounder then creamed Piyush Chawla for a boundary to hit the winning runs as the defending champions won with two balls to spare.

CSK lost Shane Watson (6) early with Gurney trapping

him in front of the wicket. Faf Du Plessis (24) was castled by Sunil Narine (2/19), who bowled a wicket maiden in the sixth over.

Ambati Rayudu (5) failed to impress the selectors on the eve of World Cup selection while Kedar Jadhav (20) also got out to leave CSK on 81/4.

Dhoni and Raina combined for a 40-run fifth wicket stand before the former was trapped by Narine, with reviews not going in the former India skipper's favour.

Earlier, recording his best figures (4/27) in the competition, Tahir bowled a game-changing 15th over to account for Chris Lynn (82; 51 balls; 7x4 6x6) and Andre Russell (10) to dent the

KKR's surge as they could only manage 161/8. Tahir was introduced in the ninth over with Lynn going great guns. The South Africa leg-spinner gave away just four runs in his first over to then wreak havoc.

The 40-year-old removed Nitish Rana (21) and Robin Uthappa (0) in the 11th over to start KKR's slide and then did the major damage in the 15th over by removing Lynn and Russell in the space of four balls. Lynn was caught at deep square leg by Shardul Thakur while substitute Dhruv Shorey took an excellent catch at long on.

In the last five overs, the hosts could muster only 28 runs with only one four at the cost of three wickets.

Shardul (2/18), who along with Tahir was the other architect of Chennai's choke, removed Shubman Gill (15) and Piyush Chawla (0) in the final over.

"I bowl according to the captain. It's always beneficial taking advice of Dhoni. He is a legend and has been helping me a lot this season. Credit goes to him," Tahir, 40, said at the post-match media conference.

Brief scores
Kolkata Knight Riders 161/8 in 20 overs (Chris Lynn 82; Imran Tahir 4/27) vs Chennai Super Kings 162/5 in 19.4 overs (Suresh Raina 58 not out, Ravindra Jadeja 31 not out; Sunil Narine 2/19).

FOCUS

Delhi Capitals ride bowlers' efforts to beat Hyderabad

IAN S
New Delhi

Despite putting up a modest 155, Delhi Capitals' (DC) bowlers came out all guns blazing to defend the target as they folded Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) for 116 in 18.5 overs to script a comfortable 39-run victory in their Indian Premier League (IPL) clash at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium, yesterday.

Hyderabad were comfortably placed at 71/0 in the 10th over before Kasigo Rabada, Chris Morris and Keemo Paul came from nowhere to rattle the hosts' batting line-up as the trio accounted for all the 10 wickets to fall.

While Rabada was exceptional with figures of 4/22, the South African was ably supported by Morris and Paul, who bagged three wickets each conceding just 22 and 17 runs, respectively.

Chasing the modest target, openers David Warner (51 off 47) and Jonny Bairstow (41 off 31) laid a perfect platform for Hyderabad as the side looked well set at 36 for no loss after five overs. The experienced duo tackled the Delhi bowlers with great skill and took their side past the 50-run mark in 7.3 overs.

At that stage it seemed the hosts will overhaul the target with ease, but some major twists were yet to follow. Paul sent back a good looking Bairstow before dismissing skipper Ken Williamson (3) to reduce Hyderabad to 78/2 in 11.4 overs.

Warner was a still a major threat before the visitors, but Hyderabad didn't lose hopes as Paul packed back Ricky Bhui (7) cheaply as Delhi keep jolting the home team.

Rabada then came with the big breakthrough, scalping

Warner in the 17th over to leave the hosts at 106/4. Warner's departure triggered a batting collapse as Rabada struck in the very next delivery to dismiss Vijay Shankar (1).

With the addition of just four runs to the scorecard, Morris joined the party. Like his compatriot Rabada, Morris too dealt a double blow by dismissing Deepak Hooda (3) and Rashid Khan (0) in back-to-back deliveries with Hyderabad still 45 runs away from victory, yesterday.

There was no stopping Morris as he soon accounted for the wicket of Abhishek Sharma (2), leaving Hyderabad reeling at 112/8 in 18 overs.

Rabada then put the final nail in the coffin as the South Africa pacer scalped two more wickets - Bhuvneshwar Kumar (2) and Khaleel Ahmed (0) - to hand Delhi a comfortable victory.

Earlier, valiant efforts by Colin Munro (40 off 24) and Shreyas Iyer (45 off 40) helped Delhi post a modest 155/7 as Hyderabad bowlers bowled decently on a good batting track. Put into bat, Delhi's innings started on a poor note as they lost openers Prithvi Shaw (4) and Shikhar Dhawan (7) with just 20 runs on the board after 3.2 overs. Khaleel accounted for both the Delhi openers.

Munro, however, tried to anchor the Delhi innings and kept the scoreboard ticking. But while trying to up the ante, he gifted his wicket to Abhishek in the eighth over.

With Delhi on 69/3, skipper Shreyas Iyer and Rishabh Pant tried to stabilise the ship, taking their side past the 100-run mark in the 12th over.

BRIEF SCORES
Delhi Capitals 155/7 (Shreyas Iyer 45, Colin Munro 40; Khaleel Ahmed 3/30) beat Sunrisers Hyderabad (David Warner 51, Jonny Bairstow 41; Kagiso Rabada 4/22) by 39 runs.



Delhi Capitals' Keemo Paul (second from left) celebrates with teammates after taking a Sunrisers Hyderabad wicket during their 2019 Indian Premier League match in Hyderabad. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

India's Rahul and Pant await World Cup fate

Reuters
New Delhi

Opener Lokesh Rahul and stumper-batsman Rishabh Pant are unlikely to sleep much last night as India selectors prepare to reveal their 15-man squad for the Cricket World Cup.

Chief selector M S K Prasad has told reporters that most of the current side picks itself and there were only a couple of spots left up for grabs for the May 30 to July 14 showpiece in England and Wales.

So while there is not a great deal of suspense hanging over Monday's scheduled news conference in Mumbai, speculation remains over who will fill at least two positions in the squad.

While India boast a formidable top order that includes captain Virat Kohli, the search continues for a reliable number four batsman. Pant, Ambati Rayudu, Vijay Shankar, Ajinkya Rahane, Manish Pandey and Dinesh Karthik have all been auditioned in the slot and all have been found wanting.

Rahul will fancy his chances as



Opener Lokesh Rahul (left) and stumper-batsman Rishabh Pant.

a back-up opener who can also bat at number four and his four 50-plus scores in the ongoing Indian Premier League could not have come at a better time.

Pant is also angling for a back-up role, behind the stumps, with Mahendra Singh Dhoni installed as India's first choice wicket-keeper. A hard-hitter who can also be played as a specialist batsman, the 21-year-old faces competition from Karthik,

whose ability to bat anywhere in the batting order makes him a limited-overs asset.

However, Karthik, 33, was left out of the home series against Australia, India's final dress rehearsal for the World Cup, which could signal a slide down the pecking order. Former test stumper Kiran More says Pant should be on the plane to England. "If I am the selector, I will take Pant to the World Cup,"



More told ESPNcricinfo.

"I will punt on him, definitely, only because he is a match-winner. That is what he has done in test matches, he can win you games single-handedly.

"He is a big-occasion player. He has got the guts to go for his shots, he is ruthless. If it clicks, it will benefit India immensely," said More, a former chief selector. Prasad and his selection committee colleagues will

also weigh the relative merit of Shankar's medium pace and Jadeja's left-arm spin before naming the second all-rounder.

Hardik Pandya remains India's first choice all-rounder while wrist-spinners Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal are expected to share the slow bowling duties.

India begin their bid for a third World Cup against South Africa in Southampton on June 5.

Ganguly best captain, Dhoni and Kohli come next: Sehwa

Former swashbuckling Indian opener Virender Sehwa yesterday said Sourav Ganguly was the best captain he played under, followed by M S Dhoni and Virat Kohli. Speaking of the skill of a true leader, Sehwa said it's knowing how to get the best from the team. The manner in which Ganguly built his side after the match-fixing controversy was a true reflection of his leadership qualities, he said.

"This, I feel genuinely, is a talent very few people had in the Indian cricket team. Sourav was one such great captain who built a good team after the match-fixing controversy. It was the team that went on to win matches," Sehwa said at the Times Network Leadership Summit. On his experience of playing under other captains like Dhoni and Kohli, Sehwa said he would still rate Sourav as the best, followed by the

two. "When you have a new team, in-experienced players, leadership matters the most," Sehwa said.

On the much awaited India-Pakistan clash at the upcoming World Cup, starting on May 30 in England and Wales, Sehwa said a contest between the arch-rivals is nothing less than a war and India should win it. "We should do whatever is good for the country. When India and Pakistan play, it's nothing less than a war. We should win the war, not lose it," the 40-year-old remarked.



NBA PLAYOFFS

Curry fires Warriors but Sixers, Raptors stunned in openers

'We imposed our will for 48 minutes. It might not be flashy but we all got to do our jobs'



Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry shoots the basketball against LA Clippers forward Montrezl Harrell (No 5) during the first-half in game one of the first round of the 2019 NBA Playoffs at Oracle Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Los Angeles

The Golden State Warriors began their quest for a three-peat by clobbering the Los Angeles Clippers, while the Brooklyn Nets and Orlando Magic delivered a pair of upset victories as the NBA playoffs began Saturday.

Stephen Curry drained eight three-pointers to give him the most in league playoff history as the two-time defending champion Warriors dominated the Clippers 121-104.

"We imposed our will for 48 minutes," said Curry. "We have been working for the last month on our collective mindset, raising our intensity and focus."

Curry finished with 38 points, shooting eight of 12 from beyond the arc to pass Ray Allen (385) for career postsea-

son threes with 386. One of his three-pointers was from a distance of about 30 feet. "Shout out to the contacts," said Curry. Curry also tallied a playoff career-high 15 rebounds and seven assists. "Curry has destroyed us all year," said Clippers coach Doc Rivers. Game two is Monday at the Warriors' Oracle Arena in Oakland, California.

The Clippers and Golden State are meeting for just the second time in the playoffs after the Clippers took a seven-game series in 2014. Draymond Green, who made all five of his shots in the opening quarter, finished with 17 points and seven assists and Kevin Durant scored 23 points for Golden State who have won seven consecutive playoff games.

Durant and Patrick Beverley were ejected with 4:41 to go, just 19 seconds after they received double-technical when Durant stripped Beverley and the Clippers guard

stumbled to the sidelines.

Elsewhere, D'Angelo Russell scored 26 points as sixth-seeded Brooklyn jolted third-seeded Philadelphia 111-102 at the Wells Fargo Center to give the Nets a 1-0 lead in the best-of-seven series. The Nets were also reliant on a big performance from their bench, with three players delivering double-digit displays to boost their offense.

Caris LeVert had 23 points while Spencer Dinwiddie added 18 and Ed Davis 12 as the Nets silenced the Sixers' home Wells Fargo Center crowd.

The Sixers meanwhile saw Jimmy Butler lead the scoring with a playoff career high 36 points while ailing Joel Embiid had 22 points. But it was a disappointing outing for Australian star Ben Simmons, who was restricted to just nine points for Philadelphia. Embiid had been doubtful with left knee soreness and was cleared to play less than 10 minutes before the

game. Embiid, who missed 14 of the team's final 24 games, looked hampered by his injury. Afterwards Embiid expressed dismay at Sixers fans who booed the home team as they slid to a disappointing loss. "The fact that it's after every single miss," he said. "Every missed shot, then you get booed. You get the next one and you think 'Should I shoot it or not because I'm about to get booed?'"

But team-mate Simmons risked the wrath of Philadelphia's support by lashing fans who booed. "If you're going to boo, then stay on that side," Simmons said. "That's how I feel, if you're a Sixer fan and you're going to boo then stay on that side." Butler however sided the Sixers could only remedy the fan response by delivering a win in game two of the series in Philadelphia on Monday. "I understand it. They want to see us win. I want to see us win, too," Butler said. "We just gotta do

better. I guarantee if we're winning they're not booing. That's how we change it. Just got to go out there and win on Monday."

In the day's other Eastern Conference match-up, the second-seeded Raptors were left ruing missed chances after crashing to a 104-101 loss to Orlando at the Scotiabank Arena.

D.J. Augustin was the hero for Orlando, draining a three-pointer with 4.2 seconds to play to seal a famous win for the seventh-seeded Magic.

RESULTS
(All series best-of-seven):
Eastern Conference
Brooklyn 111-102 Philadelphia (Brooklyn leads series 1-0)
Orlando 104-101 Toronto (Orlando leads series 1-0)
Western Conference
Golden State 121-104 Los Angeles (Golden State leads series 1-0)
San Antonio 111-102 Denver (San Antonio leads series 1-0)

NHL

Bruins bounce back to level first-round series with Leafs

AFP
Los Angeles

The Boston Bruins got back to playing to their strengths on Saturday, bouncing back from an opening series loss to defeat the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-1 and square their NHL playoff series at 1-1.

The Bruins limited their turnovers and rediscovered their scoring touch in game two after being outworked and outskated by the same 4-1 score two nights earlier. Brad Marchand had a goal and an assist and Tuukka Rask stopped 30 shots for the Bruins, who controlled their Atlantic Division rivals by taking a 3-0 lead halfway through the game.

"We didn't play to our identity in game one," said Boston coach Bruce Cassidy. "We all knew that. We wanted to move past it and we hit a lot of checklists."

Charlie Coyle, Danton Heinen and Patrice Bergeron also scored for the Bruins at the Boston Garden. The series shifts to Toronto for game three on Monday.

Boston's line of Bergeron, Marchand and David Pastrnak dominated the Leafs in the playoffs last year but they were not a factor in Thursday's game one. So getting on the board in Saturday's game was a huge relief for Bergeron and Marchand but one worrying factor for Boston might be the play of Czech forward Pastrnak, who has yet to kick his game into playoff mode.

The Bruins also might be without rushing defenceman Torey Krug going forward after he was injured on a hit by Jake Muzzin and had to leave in the middle of the game. Rask was also better in game two, allowing just one goal to Maple Leafs agitator Nazem Kadri. Frederik Andersen made 37 saves, several spectacular, for Toronto. Kadri is likely going to face a suspension from the league for a vicious crosscheck to the neck of Boston's Jake DeBrusk late in the game.



Brad Marchand of the Boston Bruins celebrates after scoring against the Toronto Maple Leafs in Game Two of the Eastern Conference First Round during the 2019 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs at TD Garden on April 13, 2019 in Boston, Massachusetts. (Getty Images/AFP)

RESULTS

Washington	4-3	Carolina
Nashville	2-1	Dallas
Boston	4-1	Toronto
Colorado	3-2	Calgary

DeBrusk and Kadri also had a run-in in the second when the Maple Leafs player appeared to injure his knee. Kadri left the game to get treatment but eventually returned to the bench.

AVS, MACKINNON RALLY TO BEAT FLAMES IN OT

Nathan MacKinnon scored the overtime winner as the visiting Colorado Avalanche claimed a 3-2 victory over the Calgary Flames on Saturday night to even their opening-round Stanley Cup playoff series at one win apiece. Game 3 of the best-of-seven series will be Monday in Denver. Right after Calgary's Michael Frolik was stymied on a glorious opportunity, MacKinnon took a pass from Mikko Rantanen, sped down his off-wing and wired a glove-side wrist shot for the winner at 8:27 of the extra frame. Avalanche goalie Philipp Grubauer made 35 saves. Colorado responded to the 4-0 Calgary win in the opener with more intensity. That effort was rewarded when Matt Nieto opened the scoring with a short-handed goal 7:16 into the second period. Calgary was generating pressure on the power play, but T.J. Brodie couldn't control a bouncing puck at the blue line, and Nieto sped away on a breakaway that he finished with a top-shelf wrist shot.

MLB

Davis ends record drought, leads Orioles past Red Sox

Reuters
Boston

Chris Davis had three hits and four RBIs to end his record skid with a flourish as the Baltimore Orioles snapped a four-game losing streak with a 9-5 win over the host Boston Red Sox on Saturday.

Davis, who entered the contest hitless in his last 54 at-bats dating to last season, hit a two-run single in the first inning to end his hitting drought. He added a tiebreaking double in the fifth inning and another double in the eighth, his first three-hit game since Aug. 28. Andrew Cashner (3-1) once again played stopper for the Orioles, giving up three runs on three hits in five-plus innings. It was the third straight win for Cashner, who similarly ended a four-game Orioles' losing streak his last time out against the Oakland A's.

Christian Vazquez hit a two-run home run and had four RBIs for the Red Sox, whose first winning streak of the season was snapped at two games. Rick Porcello (0-3) struggled with his command through four-plus innings, walking five and allowing three runs on six hits.

Baltimore loaded the bases with two outs in the first inning, setting the stage for Davis to end his drought in triumphant fashion. He delivered with a line drive to right and asked for the ball after he reached first base.

Vazquez's homer knotted the score at 2-2

RESULTS

Orioles	9-5	Red Sox
Yankees	4-0	White Sox
Astros	3-1	Mariners
Reds	5-2	Cardinals
Blue Jays	3-1	Rays
Royals	3-0	Indians
Giants	5-2	Rockies
Marlins	10-3	Phillies
Twins	4-3	Tigers
Angels	6-5	Cubs
Braves	11-7	Mets
Padres	5-4	D'back
Nationals	3-2	Pirates
Brewers	4-1	Dodgers

in the third, driving home Rafael Devers.

Porcello, who continued to pitch in and out of trouble, allowed back-to-back singles to begin the fifth, ending his day. Heath Hembree came on and gave up Davis' go-ahead double but kept the deficit at 3-2.

The Orioles opened things up with four runs in the sixth. Cashner, who had allowed just the one hit entering the inning, got in trouble to begin the bottom of the frame before Jimmy Yacabonis took over. He got out of a first- and third spot with a Mitch Moreland double play that scored a run, which was charged to Cashner.

The Orioles tacked on two more runs in the seventh, which helped because the Red Sox scored two in the bottom of the inning on a Vazquez double. Jonathan Villar, Trey Mancini, Rio Ruiz and Renato Nunez had two hits apiece for Baltimore, and Ruiz and Nunez each had two RBIs.

YANKEES SABATHIA DOMINATES IN RETURN

Left-hander CC Sabathia gave the New York Yankees a much-needed boost in his return from the injured list Saturday, dominating the Chicago White Sox in a 4-0 win.

Sabathia threw five scoreless innings in the contest, allowing just one hit. He tossed 62 pitches before turning it over to the bullpen as the Yankees scored four runs in their final two innings to snap a four-game losing streak.

"I was out there the first inning and shaking, but it felt good to be back out there and be with the guys, and it feels good to get a win today," Sabathia said. "Being back out there, thinking where I came from in December and actually being back on the mound, it was cool. I was able to kind of harness those nerves and go out and be smooth."

Sabathia, 38, hadn't pitched yet in 2019 as he continued his recovery from offseason knee surgery and angioplasty. He was on the active roster earlier in the season to serve a five-game suspension - a holdover from last season. An 18-year veteran, Sabathia has announced this will be his final season.



Baltimore Orioles first baseman Chris Davis hits an RBI double against the Boston Red Sox during the fifth inning at Fenway Park. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

SPOTLIGHT

Djokovic quietly confident for Monte Carlo Masters

'I can't wait to step on court, I've been training hard'

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Novak Djokovic said yesterday he is working to ensure that last month's sub-par hard-court performances do not affect his seasonal bow on clay in Monte Carlo. The world number one kicks off at his home event starting in the second round against either Philipp Kohlschreiber or a qualifier.

Djokovic, winner of the last three Grand Slam titles and dreaming of completing his personal sweep with another trophy at Roland Garros, was stopped in the third round at Indian Wells last month.

He was then unable to hold onto a 6-1 lead in the opening set of his fourth-rounder in Miami, going out in three to Robert Bautista Agut.

"I can't wait to step on court, I've been training hard," he said on a rainy opening day of the Masters 1000.

"Some top players have been here for a week practising. I had a great last six months of the season, the 31-year-old Serb said.

"And I had an amazing start this year. Indian Wells and Miami were so-so - I'll try to pick that up and see how it goes on clay."

Djokovic and 11-time winner Rafael Nadal, along with Roland Garros runner-up Dominic Thiem, stand as favourites on paper for the first major title of the French Open preliminary events.

Roger Federer, who has skipped the clay season completely for the last two years and will return to Roland Garros for the first time since a 2015 quarter-final loss to fellow Swiss Stan Wawrinka, is not playing.

The 20-time Grand Slam champion will appear in his only scheduled pre-Paris clay event in Madrid starting May 5.

"All of our games will be tested big-time - but that's why we're here," Djokovic said of the slow Monte Carlo clay, which might be made even heavier by wet weather predicted for later in the week. The top seed said that while he would prefer to head to Paris with a title in his pocket, it's not a desperate situation.

"But I've had some (successful) Roland Garros tournaments in the past where I didn't win any of the big (clay) ones (Monte Carlo, Madrid, Rome) before.

"It (lacking a major clay title) would not affect my state of mind but it would serve my confidence better if I'd won one of them coming into Paris."



NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Nishikori tips Federer for clay comeback success

Roger Federer may not be playing at the Monte Carlo Masters but the Swiss legend was still at the forefront of 2018 finalist Key Nishikori's thoughts yesterday. "Everything is possible (for Federer)," Asia's top player predicted. Federer is due for a return to the dirt after two seasons completely off the surface in three weeks at Madrid, his lone scheduled tune-up prior to the French Open, which he last played in 2015.

"It (winning Roland Garros) might be tougher for him than winning the Australian Open or Wimbledon, but I'm sure he can do anything if he tries 100 per cent," said Nishikori.

"He's a lot different than anyone else on the Tour," added the world number three who lost the

final here a year ago as Rafael Nadal won his 11th title in the principality.

"I'm sure Roger can do very well on clay. He's still my idol, he's the best player in history. "I'm happy to see him playing more tournaments, I hope I can play him again," said the player who has beaten the 37-year-old Swiss three times and most recently last November at the year-end ATP Finals.

"He came from injury and won the Australian Open (2017). I'm sure he works harder than anyone else off court. I hope he does well," Nishikori said. As for his own performance, the Japanese ace is optimistic after his 2018 showing in the Principality.

"I'm very happy to be back. I have good memories. Last year I

gained confidence after coming back at this tournament from injury.

"I'm looking forward to playing this year. There are a lot of guys who are tough on clay, especially Rafa and Novak (Djokovic). "I've loved playing on clay the last couple of years, I hope I can win the title. Winning a clay tournament is a big goal for me this year," said the two-time champion in Barcelona, Nadal's home event.

But he is certainly not taking Spain's king of clay for granted. "This surface suits his game more and this event suits him even more than some tournaments on clay. It plays a lot slower and heavier, it's not easy for the opponent to hit a winner. "I'm sure he feels confident playing here," Nishikori said of Nadal,

who has been out for half a month trying to heal yet another problem with his left knee. "But still, a couple of guys would have big chances to beat him." Fifth seed Nishikori will open his campaign against the winner from Fernando Verdasco and Pierre Hugues Herbert of France.



any court in the world.

"But it depends on how he's feeling physically. He's the number one guy on this surface without a doubt."

Djokovic also believes in the power of Federer as the 37-year-old steps back onto the clay. "Roger playing (clay) again this

season is great for tennis," he said. "He's been playing great tennis lately, winning two out of his last three events (Dubai and Miami with an Indian Wells final against Thiem). It's as good as it gets.

"I don't see any particular issues for him on this (slow) sur-

face. He's won all the big ones.

"He is who he is, I always expect the highest level from him - it's always there.

"He can be a favourite to win any tournament. He's got a better title chance at tournaments other than Roland Garros, but he has won it in the past (2009)."

TENNIS

Paire wins 2nd ATP title in Marrakech

Reuters
Marrakech

Frenchman Benoit Paire claimed a second career ATP singles title when he breezed past Spain's Pablo Andujar 6-2 6-3 to lift the Grand Prix Hassan II in Marrakech yesterday.

The world number 69 broke defending champion Andujar's serve twice in the first set and then claimed the sixth game of the second to coast to victory and add to his 2015 Swedish Open title. Andujar was hoping for a record fourth victory at the event after lifting the trophy in 2011, 2012 and 2018, but managed just a single break point in the contest, which he failed to convert, and slipped to a fourth successive defeat to the Frenchman.

Paire, 29, who has a career-high ranking of 18 in singles, beat compatriot and wildcard entry Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in the semi-finals on Saturday.

HERCOG OVERCOMES SWIATEK TO WIN TITLE

Slovenian Polona Hercog overcame determined rookie Iga Swiatek 6-3 3-6 6-3 to win the Lugano Open yesterday for her first title in seven years.

Hercog, ranked 89 in the world, shot out of the blocks after an hour-long rain delay early in the contest to win the opening set as 17-year-old Swiatek appeared to feel the pressure in the first final of her career. Poland's Swiatek, last year's Wimbledon junior champion, raised her game midway through the second set to drag the contest into a decider.

However, after a shaky start to the third set where Hercog found herself down 2-0, the 28-year-old relied on her powerful serve to take control



of the match before sealing the third title of her career.

THIEM CONFIRMS SPLIT WITH COACH

Dominic Thiem confirmed on Sunday's opening day of the Monte Carlo Masters that he has all but split from longtime coach Gunter Bresnik.

The 26-year-old who played the 2018 French Open final against Rafael Nadal and won the Indian Wells Masters title on hardcourt a month ago for a career breakthrough, explained the parting of ways.

"We've been together 15 years, he will stay on my team - but tennis-wise, it's over."

Reports in Austrian media had been circulating for months concerning the strained relationship between a mentor tired of travelling the circuit and a rising-star pupil.

Thiem worked for a time with Galo Blanco as travelling coach. But last year the Spaniard joined the new Spanish Davis Cup organiser Kosmos.

2004 Athens Olympic champion Nicolas Pietrangola began working with Thiem in February at South American events and was on board for the Indian Wells trophy success.

FOCUS

Unrepentant Folau content to quit rugby

AFP
Sydney

Unrepentant Wallabies star Israel Folau stood by his controversial anti-gay comments and said he was content to walk away from Rugby with his faith in God taking priority.

The deeply religious 30-year-old caused a storm last week after posting on Instagram that "Hell awaits" homosexuals and other sinners. It sparked a fierce backlash and Rugby Australia said it planned to sack him.

The two sides met on Friday with the dual international, who started his career in Rugby league, expected to go through a code of conduct hearing amid reports that he may have a legal case for religious discrimination.

"It's obviously a decision that's in the process right now but I believe in a God that's in control of all things," Folau told the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper. "Whatever His will is, whether that's to continue playing or not, I'm more than happy to do what He wants me to do."

Folau, Super Rugby's record try scorer, is Australia's most marketable player and was a key part of the Wallabies plans for the World Cup this year. But he has long riled those in power with his extreme views.

Last week he posted a banner that read: "Drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolators - Hell awaits you."

It remains online and has attracted more than 38,000 likes. He was embroiled in a similar furore last year but escaped without sanction.

WORLD RUGBY SEVENS SERIES

South Africa produce big comeback to win title

AFP
Singapore

South Africa recovered from a 19-point deficit to stun defending champions Fiji and win the World Rugby Sevens Series tournament in Singapore yesterday.

Winners of the Hong Kong Sevens last week, the Fijians appeared to be on course for a second consecutive title in Singapore when they raced to a 19-0 lead at half-time in the final.

However, the Springbok Sevens staged a big comeback after the interval with Selwyn Davids kicking a last-minute penalty to seal a 20-19 victory.

England beat series leaders the United States 28-7 to finish third in Singapore.

New Zealand's hopes of winning the overall series title for the first time since 2014 suffered a massive blow after they were beaten 19-17 by Samoa in the fifth-place playoff to drop 15 points behind the USA in the race for top spot.

South Africa won all five of their matches on their run to the final in Singapore which included a 17-7 victory over Fiji during pool play on Saturday before wins against Samoa (21-12) in the quarter-finals and USA (24-12) in the semi-finals.

But they were blitzed by the Fijians in the

opening half of the final as tries by Aminiasi Tuimaba, Napolioni Bolaca and Vilimoni Botitu put the Pacific island side 19 points up at the interval.

However, the South Africans came back strongly in the second half and drew within two points of the Fijians at 19-17 after tries by Kurt-Lee Arendse, Angelo Davids and Ryan Oosthuizen.

The comeback was completed when Fiji conceded a penalty right in front of the posts in the final minute and Davids drop-kicked the winning points to secure his side's second victory in this year's series following their triumph in Vancouver last month.

South Africa's victory means that the US remain at the top of the series table with 145 points, three ahead of Fiji on 142 with New Zealand third on 130.

South Africa complete the top four with 121 points, 14 ahead of fifth-placed England.

With the top four teams in this year's series earning berths at the 2020 Olympics, the US only need six more points from the final two tournaments in London and Paris to book their spot in Tokyo.

At the bottom end of the table, Wales secured five valuable points after reaching the challenge trophy semi-finals.

They moved three points ahead of Japan in the battle to avoid relegation from the series with the last-placed of the 15 core teams set to be replaced by Ireland next season.



South Africa players celebrates after winning the Singapore Rugby Sevens Cup in Singapore yesterday. (AFP)

ATHLETICS

Walsh, Crouser to resume shot put rivalry in Doha

'I expect a very tough competition in the Khalifa International Stadium on May third'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The men's shot put was one of the highest quality events across the athletics programme last season and six of the seven throwers who surpassed the 22-metre line will be competing in the Doha Diamond League on May 3.

The event came to a climax in the Zurich Diamond League where reigning world indoor and outdoor champion Tom Walsh from New Zealand reached out to a second-round effort of 22.60m to eclipse the Diamond League record by four centimetres.

"Breaking the Diamond League record in Zurich to win the Diamond League title was one of the highlights of my season. Of course, I have very high expectations this year as well and I have been pleased with my performances so far in 2019," said Walsh.

Walsh holds the world outdoor lead with 21.91m from the Australian Championships where he participated as a guest but the calibre of the field is such that a throw in excess of this mark could be needed to secure victory and maximum points next month.

"I expect a very tough competition in the Khalifa International Stadium on May third and I think I will have to throw over 22 metres to take the win," said Walsh. "I feel ready and I'm sure we will put on another great show for the crowd in Doha."

His principal rival will be the reigning Olympic champion Ryan Crouser from the United States who threw 22.53m last year. They competed against each other nine times in 2018 with Crouser leading their head-to-head 5-4.

"This will be my first time in Doha and I am excited to throw in the Khalifa International Stadium. My two indoor competitions went very well and I am ready to put out some big throws outdoors," said Crouser, who threw 22.33m in his first competition of the season at the



Olympic gold medalist Ryan Crouser (C), silver medalist Joe Kovacs (L) and bronze medalist Tom Walsh in Rio in 2018.

Millrose Games in New York. The line-up also features 2017 Diamond League champion Darrell Hill from the United States — who finished second to Walsh in Zurich last year with 22.40m — and Darlan Romani from Brazil who improved his South American record to 22.00m in 2018.

The European challenge is headed by reigning European indoor and outdoor champion Michal Haratyk and world indoor bronze medalist Tomas Stanek who both set national records last season. Haratyk set an outright Polish record of 22.08m while Stanek improved the Czech record to 22.17m during the indoor season.

And adding even more depth to an already illustrious line-up are the two throwers who preceded Walsh as world outdoor champion: 2015 champion and 2017 silver medalist Joe Kovacs

from the United States and 2011 and 2013 champion David Storl from Germany.

The men's discus also boasts a star-studded line-up featuring world and European champion Andrius Gudzius from Lithuania, world and European silver medalist Daniel Stahl from Sweden and Olympic champion Christoph Harting from Germany.

"This will be my first international competition of the season and I know it will be another tough battle against a strong group of throwers including Daniel and Christoph who I have competed against many times in the past," said Gudzius.

"I am also looking forward to making my debut in the Khalifa International Stadium where I will be defending my world title later this season."

Gudzius defeated Stahl for the world title by just two centime-

tres in London in 2017. They will be joined by the bronze medalist from that competition Mason Finley from the United States and Olympic silver medalist Piotr Malachowski from Poland.

Bulgaria's Mirela Demireva ended Mariya Lasitskene's 45-competition win streak in the Rabat Diamond League last July and the reigning Olympic and European silver medalist will be honing in on the second Diamond League win of her career in the high jump in Doha.

"I was sorry that I could not perform during the indoor season but I am looking forward to testing my shape against a strong group of jumpers at the Khalifa International Stadium," said Demireva. "It will be an important season with the World Championships taking place in this stadium later this season. I have medals from the Olympic Games and European Champi-

onships but not from the World Championships so this is obviously my main objective for 2019." The line-up also includes Elena Vallortigara from Italy who fulfilled the promise she showed as a teenager a decade ago by improving her lifetime best from 1.91m to 2.02m last year. Former European indoor champion Airine Palsyte from Lithuania and Ukraine's Kateryna Tabashnyk, who cleared 1.99m during the indoor season, should also feature as well.

But the established names could be displaced by the precocious Yaroslava Mahuchikh from Ukraine who makes her debut in the Doha Diamond League at the age of 17. Mahuchikh is the reigning world and European U18 champion and made headlines during the indoor season when she equalled the world indoor U20 record of 1.99m.

CYCLING

Veteran Gilbert wins Paris-Roubaix

AFP
Roubaix, France

Belgian veteran Philippe Gilbert won the cobbled classic Paris Roubaix cycling race yesterday after a cat-and-mouse final struggle with Germany's Nils Politt while another Belgian Yves Lampaert was third.

Six riders, including defending champion Peter Sagan, broke away with around 55km remaining but the Deceuninck-Quick-Step pair Gilbert and Lampaert worked together to drop the Slovak on the final cobbled section.

The victory gives former world champion Gilbert his fourth of five of the so called 'Monuments', long one-day races, after he won the Tour of Flanders, Tour of

Lombardy and Liege-Bastogne-Liege, just the Milan-San Remo missing from his prize list.

"It's really special. It was a really daring attack and it came off," said the 36-year-old who also led an earlier breakaway and was the architect of Sagan's downfall.

Gilbert said he was proud of reinventing his style to carve out a successful late career.

"When I decided to go for the classics they said the cobbles weren't for me. I was just a puncher, but now I'm more complete.

The race was marked by relatively few crashes, although Tiesj Benoot went to hospital after crashing through the back windscreens of the Jumbo-Visma team car that had braked suddenly to miss a faller.



Belgium's Philippe Gilbert (L) reacts after winning the 117th edition of the Paris-Roubaix one-day classic cycling race yesterday.

BADMINTON

Momota prevents Ginting smash and grab to win title

AFP
Singapore

Japan's Kento Momota withstood a barrage of smashes from Indonesia's Anthony Sinisuka Ginting to rally for a thrilling 10-21 21-19 21-13 victory yesterday in the Singapore Open final.

The world champion struggled to contain his powerful Indonesian opponent, who was finding both corners of the court in the first half of the match.

But the top seed dug deep to fight back from 16-11 behind in the second game to force a decider.

Momota trailed again in the last game as Ginting sought a third straight upset win in as many days.

But the left-hander used a combination of improvisation and guile to craft a run of 13 points in 14 to seal a stunning victory with a disguised drop shot on his first match point.

"I felt my opponent played better than me today but I was able to capitalise when he got tired," Momota, who also won the Singapore title in 2015, told reporters.

"He tried to push a little too hard in the second game but I kept telling myself to stay patient and never give up."

In the women's singles final, Tai Tzu-ying claimed her second Singapore Open title with a 21-19 21-15 victory over Japan's Nozomi Okuhara.

The Taiwanese world number

one backed up last week's Malaysia Open triumph with a display full of speed, skill and spontaneity to outfox the world number three in 40 minutes.

The result improved her head-to-head record against the energetic Okuhara to 5-4.

The match soon settled into a rhythm with Tai using deft drop shots and disguised smashes to keep Okuhara moving, while her opponent went high and long in an attempt to pin the top seed to the back of the court.

There was little to separate them in the early exchanges but Tai managed to string together runs of points in the later stages of both games to pull clear, the 24-year-old completing the win with a crosscourt smash.

"Okuhara is a good opponent, she's very durable, so I was prepared for a long match," Tai said. "I am playing well right now but it's important to stay injury-free with the Tokyo Olympics coming up next year."

In other finals, Thailand's Dechapol Puavaranukroh and Sapsiree Taerattanachai eased to a 21-14 21-6 victory over Malaysia's Tan Kian Meng and Lai Pei Jing in the mixed doubles.

Japan's Mayu Matsumoto and Wakana Nagahara beat South Korea's Kim Hye-jeong and Kong Hee-yong 21-17 22-20 in the women's doubles.

There was further success for Japan in the men's doubles as Takeshi Kamura and Keigo Sonoda outlasted Indonesia's Mohamed Ahsan and Hendra Setiawan 21-13 19-21 21-17.

BYBERG CHAMPION IN QATAR SENIOR OPEN GOLF



Claes Byberg (with trophy) displayed dazzling form to emerge victorious in the Gross score category of Qatar Senior Open Golf Tournament organised by Doha Golf Club over the weekend. The 2-day competition played on the DGC Championship course attracted 120 golfers. Byberg carded a

gross score of 143 after 36 holes while Rashid Akl who scored 146 was declared runner-up. Title sponsor of the event was Ammico which has been sponsoring the event since its inception three years ago. Ammico CEO Jamal Nasir and managing partner Fazal

Kazi hosted a prize distribution and dinner for all golfers and gave away prizes to all winners. Fahad bin Nasser al-Naimi, general secretary of the Qatar Golf Association said that the Qatar Senior Open was one of the most popular events organised by the Doha Golf Club.



Winner Japan's Kento Momota (R) poses for a photo with Indonesia's Anthony Sinisuka Ginting after their men's singles final match at the Singapore Open badminton tournament yesterday.

FORMULA 1

Hamilton wins 1,000th race in Mercedes one-two

The title-holder from Britain finished more than 6.5 seconds ahead of Bottas

AFP
Shanghai

Lewis Hamilton said that he "redeemed" himself with a lightning start to win the 1,000th Formula One grand prix yesterday in a blustery Shanghai.

Hamilton started from second on the grid but grabbed the lead from Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas on the first corner and romped to a victory which gives him the world championship lead.

The title-holder from Britain finished more than 6.5 seconds ahead of Bottas in the third Mercedes one-two in as many races this season, with Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel third.

Max Verstappen of Red Bull was fourth and Charles Leclerc in the second Ferrari was fifth.

Sixth was Verstappen's teammate Pierre Gasly, the Frenchman earning a bonus point for clocking the quickest lap, one minute 34.742 seconds, in windy and hazy conditions.

Hamilton, for whom this was a sixth Chinese Grand Prix win and 75th overall, said that it was "a little bit of a struggle this weekend for me".

The five-time world champion wrestled with his car in qualifying but said that "a shift in driving style enabled me to unlock a bit more the potential of the car".

"The start was obviously great, which was really the decisive moment of the race. After that it was fairly straightforward."

The 34-year-old, who now leads the Finn Bottas by six points in the standings, said that he has had problems with his starts down the years.

"The first few races have been very difficult for me off the line so it's nice to finally redeem myself and rectify that," he added.

Bottas, who pipped Hamilton to pole by just 0.023 seconds, was always playing catch-up after labouring out of the blocks.

"I lost it on the start, honestly, shame about the start, I got some wheel spin on the start line," he said.

Talented 21-year-old Leclerc pulled off the same trick at the expense of teammate Vettel, darting into third, but the German ultimately prevailed in the battle of the Ferraris.

Mercedes "were too quick right from the start," said Vettel, who climbed atop the podium for the first time in 2019.

There was more early drama when Toro Rosso's Daniil Kvyat

REYNOLD
GULF TIMES
15-04-2019



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates on his car after winning the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai yesterday.

tangled with both McLarens of Lando Norris and Carlos Sainz, earning the Russian a drive-through penalty.

On lap 11, four-time world champion Vettel leapfrogged back in front of Monaco's

Leclerc into third following radio orders from Ferrari telling the youngster to let him pass.

"We do our job, stay focused," Leclerc - agonisingly denied victory last time out in Bahrain after his Ferrari lost power -

was informed on team radio after he briefly protested.

Back at the front, Hamilton began pulling away, establishing a more than five-second gap on Bottas with a third of the race gone.

With Hamilton - winner in Bahrain two weeks ago - serene up top, the real battles unfolded behind him.

Vettel, under pressure after a number of unforced errors going back to last season, went wheel-to-wheel with Verstappen after both pitted for fresh tyres.

Vettel, Bottas and then Toro Rosso's Alexander Albon, who missed qualifying after a nasty crash in final practice, all exchanged fastest laps.

The Thai-Briton Albon was named "driver of the day" after battling from the pits and into the points.

On lap 38 of the 56 it was Leclerc and Bottas who had a skirmish in the compelling battle for second.

Leclerc then pitted and was momentarily held up by a comparatively sluggish change of tyres. Nico Hulkenberg, who qualified eighth for Renault, saw his race come to an early conclusion after the team retired his faltering car.

Norris and Kvyat were also forced out before the end.

The fourth race of the season takes place on the streets of Baku, in Azerbaijan, in a fortnight.

SPOTLIGHT

Mercedes nail 'risky' double pit stop to reign in China

AFP
Shanghai

Mercedes pulled off a "risky" but well-choreographed double pit stop to help wrap up a one-two at the 1,000th Formula One Grand Prix yesterday in Shanghai.

Lewis Hamilton won the landmark race ahead of Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas, with the rival Ferrari of Sebastian Vettel a distant third.

Mercedes have now taken first and second place at all three grands prix this season, even though Ferrari were thought to have the quicker car.

With the race yesterday entering its second half and Hamilton out in front, Mer-

cedes called both cars in to switch to medium tyres.

World champion Hamilton, who now leads the standings from Bottas, praised his team's decision to "double-stack".

"I didn't actually know he (Bottas) was behind me in the pit stop. Fantastic job by the team," said the Briton.

Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff said it was a calculated gamble.

"Stacking the cars for a double pit stop was a risky moment because you have everything to lose when you're leading the race," said Wolff.

"But we thought we would lose positions if we had stopped one of them earlier.

"Our plan worked out perfectly. It was a well-choreographed pitstop and the team did a brilliant job."

RESULTS AND STANDINGS

Race (top 10)

1. Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Mercedes-AMG) 305km in thr 32min 08.734sec
2. Valtteri Bottas (FIN/Mercedes-AMG) at 6.552sec
3. Sebastian Vettel (GER/Ferrari) at 13.744sec
4. Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull-Honda) at 27.627sec
5. Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari) at 31.276sec
6. Pierre Gasly (FRA/Red Bull-Honda) at 1min 29.307sec
7. Daniel Ricciardo (AUS/Renault) at 1 lap
8. Sergio Perez (MEX/Racing Point-Mercedes) at 1 lap
9. Kimi Raikkonen (FIN/Alfa Romeo Racing-Ferrari) at 1 lap
10. Alexander Albon (THA/Toro Rosso-Honda) at 1 lap

Drivers standings (top10):

1. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 68 pts
2. Valtteri Bottas (FIN) 62
3. Max Verstappen (NED) 39
4. Sebastian Vettel (GER) 37
5. Charles Leclerc (MON) 36
6. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 13
7. Kimi Raikkonen (FIN) 12
8. Lando Norris (GBR) 8
9. Kevin Magnussen (DEN) 8
10. Daniel Ricciardo (AUS) 6

Constructors standings:

1. Mercedes-AMG 130 pts
2. Ferrari 73
3. Red Bull-Honda 52
4. Renault 12
5. Alfa Romeo Racing-Ferrari 12
6. Haas 8
7. McLaren-Renault 8
8. Racing Point-Mercedes 7
9. Toro Rosso-Honda 4

RALLYING

Al-Attiyah tops impressive field for Jordan event



By Sports Reporter
Amman

The resurgence of interest in the FIA Middle East Rally Championship continues to gather pace with the news that the Jordan Rally has attracted 18 entries and an additional five crews for a national rally.

Jordan Motorsport officially announced today that competitors from 10 nations will take part in the second round of the regional rally series on April 25-27.

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah is the defending champion and a winner of the Jordan Rally on a dozen occasions and he tops the entry list in a Volkswagen Polo GTI R5.

Al-Attiyah and his French co-driver Matthieu Baumel face competition from a further three R5 cars in the hands of fellow Qataris Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (Skoda) and Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah (Ford) and Jordan's Marouf Abu Samra (Ford).

The MERC 2 (formerly Group N) category has attracted a further 12 entries and defending champion Henry Kahy of Lebanon and local driver Asem Aref will do battle in MERC 3 for two-wheel drive vehicles.

Kuwaiti driver Meshari al-Thefiri returns to defend the MERC 2 title he won so convincingly in 2018. He has al-

ready claimed maximum points for his win in Qatar last month. Competition is likely to come from Jordanian drivers Khaled Juma and Ihab al-Shorafi, four Omani entrants headed by Abdullah al-Ruwahi, fellow Kuwaiti Saleh bin Eidan, Saudi Arabia's Saeed al-Mouri and Lebanese rookie Alex Feghali.

The Jordanian quintet of Salameh al-Gammaz, Tareq al-Taher, Ziad Miqdad, Amjad Anasweh and Sami Fleifel will take part in a national rally category running behind the main FIA event.

The 2019 Jordan Rally will be based at the Crowne Plaza Jordan Dead Sea Resort and gets underway with a ceremonial start at Abdali Boulevard in Amman from 19.00hrs on Thursday, April 25.

Rally officials have made changes to the route and special stages that teams will tackle on the second round of the regional series. The rally will now be fought out over 22 special stages and 247.20 competitive kilometres in a route of 563.38km.

Teams will face 11 special stages on Friday (April 26) and a further 11 on Saturday. The Dead Sea super special stage of 2.59km will now round off the competitive action on both days after two loops of five gravel specials each day.

Support for the event comes from Abdali Boulevard, Mount Dew, Hala and Bliss FM.

MOTORCYCLING

Qatar riders pleased with Spain championship show

By Sports Reporter
Jerez, Spain

The Qatar team ended their participation in the first round of the Spanish Motorcycling Championships, which concluded here yesterday with participation from some of the best riders in the world.

Abdullah al-Qubaisi, Sheikh Jassim bin Ghanem al-Thani and Hamad Shota formed part of the team. Saeed al-Sulaiti had to pull out after fracturing a finger during practice on the first day.

Abdullah al-Qubaisi achieved tenth place in the 600CC Superstock event with a best lap time of 1min: 46.575secs among 34 riders from 12 countries, including Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, France, Russia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Finland, Norway, Colombia, Chile and Argentina.

Sheikh Jassim finished 27th, his best time of 1:51.005 coming on the second lap.



Spaniard Oscar Gutierrez won the event, followed by his compatriot Juan and Frenchman Louis Erbil.

In the Moto 4 category, Shota was unlucky to fall from his bike and pull out. Spain's Angel Bakoiras took the first spot,

while his compatriot Alberto Fernandez was second.

Abdulrahman al-Mannai, the president of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle federation (QMMF) was happy with the riders' performance.

"All the riders put in a good performance considering the fact that it was their first participation in an international tournament outside Qatar," said al-Mannai.

"We have great confidence that as they gain in experience they will be able to achieve higher levels."

He added that the QMMF doesn't want to rush them.

"Ours is a long-term goal. We want our young riders to gain valuable experience from these competitions so that they can improve and would be able to compete with the best riders in future," said al-Mannai.

Hamad Shota said the experience at Jerez will help him develop as a competitive rider. "I am sad that I had to pull out of the main race after falling from my bike, but despite that I gained valuable experience. This was a good start for me and I hope to improve further," Shota said.

He thanked the QMMF for supporting him and the other riders.